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Language, Discourse & Society

Published: 01/06/2017

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

Davis, H., Day, G., Eichsteller, M., & Baker, S. (2017). Language in autobiographical narratives: Motivation, capital and transnational imaginations. *Language, Discourse & Society*, 5(1), 53-70. http://www.language-and-society.org/journal/5-1/3_Davis_Day_Eichsteller_Baker.pdf

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Language in autobiographical narratives: Motivation, capital and transnational imaginations

Howard Davis¹, Graham Day², Marta Eichsteller³ & Sally Baker⁴

Abstract

Anderson's notion of imagined communities has helped to focus attention on the complex connection between language and membership of social groupings. This article explores the sense of membership of an imagined transnational community of 'Europe' through a selection of autobiographical narrative interviews in a multi-nation study of identity formation. Data drawn from a sample of European Union citizens reveals how people narrate their experiences of transnational mobility and how languages feature in their storytelling. We present evidence of key linguistic situations and encounters, including childhood experiences of other languages, experiences of education, as well as language choices in mature relationships and careers. We engage with the question of what it means to identify oneself as a learner, user or non-user of languages in the context of cross-border mobility. To the extent that language acquisition is advantageous for expanding cultural horizons, increasing mobility, extending networks and enhancing careers, the data is consistent with concepts of imagined community and language learning motivation. However, we also see evidence that linguistic diversity is a source of inequality and that languages can exclude as well as include. This prompts a conceptual discussion designed to articulate the problem that what is imagined is less than a collective identity or community, and more a mental frame of reference. In this context, we consider the applicability in the European context of the metaphor of linguistic capital, investment, markets and the right to speak developed by Bourdieu and others. Extempore narratives provide particularly valuable data for showing how social relations of language are configured and how they are experienced as constraint as well as opportunity.

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Keywords

Biographical narrative; Europe; linguistic capital; mental space; transnational mobility

First submission: December 2016; Revised: May 2017, Accepted: May 2017

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Introduction

Recent developments, not least the UK’s decision to leave the EU (‘Brexit’), have cast doubt on the continuing success of the European project (Chopin & Jamet, 2016). Growing public disaffection across a number of member states has highlighted the fragility of any common understanding of what constitutes the meaning and purpose of a shared European future. After almost sixty years of concentrated political and administrative effort, the gulf between the rhetoric of an emergent European identity and the reality of national and subnational (local) commitments remains enormous. A substantial proportion of the EU’s population remains indifferent or even hostile to its purported values and objectives (ECFR, 2013; Eurobarometer, 2015; Wellings, 2012; Zalc, 2013). For them, Europe has failed to gel as an imagined community that can command their allegiance and respect (Ivic, 2016). There are very many reasons for this, among them the significance of language as a basic resource and mode of communication.

The centrality of language to the imagined community is a consistent theme of Benedict Anderson’s (1991: 7) seminal discussion. In Anderson’s imagined community, there is a “deep horizontal comradeship” between people who may never meet one another, which rests primarily on a shared vernacular language and access to a common print culture. It is this shared language which is held to be crucial to the formation of the national identities which the European project seeks now to transcend or subsume. As Norton (2013: 8) puts it, “Imagined communities refer to groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination”, and we are able to do so primarily because we speak and comprehend a common language. Conversely, differences of language represent intractable barriers or obstacles to the development of a common consciousness. This is not a problem which Anderson addresses in any depth. Thus (despite his avowed Marxist leanings), Anderson is singularly quiet on the issue of how the imagined community of the nation extends to include members of different classes and other social groups across the gulf in literacy, dialect, standards of life, habits and customs dividing them, so that they ingest the ‘same’ conception of their nationhood, or feel that they inhabit the same social world (Day & Thompson, 2004: 92).

Furthermore, the connection between language and membership of social groupings is complex. For instance, it is well established that the gaps between the formation of national boundaries and the distribution of particular languages are formidable. In remarkably few of the existing European states is language coterminous with the national territory: languages cross national boundaries, and minority languages exist within them (Wright, 2016). Billig (1995: 36) notes that languages themselves have to be imagined as distinct entities; language does not simply ‘give’ us nations – indeed, nations or states play a formative role in the production of language. Hence the ‘idea’ of the nation often precedes coherent linguistic foundations, or can be deployed to sharpen and promote linguistic differences, so that the contention that nations and national identities grow spontaneously out of a shared language must be heavily qualified (Day & Thompson, 2004: 90). All this points to linguistic diversity as a major complicating factor in the construction of a supranational or transnational identification as ‘Europeans’.

The relevance of linguistic diversity, and experiences of second or further languages, became evident in an international study – the Euroidentities project – which set out to elicit lengthy, personal and reflective accounts of biographies involving mobility and cross-national

relationships in Europe (Miller & Schütze, 2011; Miller, 2012). The objective was to investigate the problem of European identity without presupposing a framework of reference beyond the need for individuals to connect their own biographical construction of identity with orientations to collective concerns at varying levels of abstraction. In this article, we use these interviews as a resource to show how people relate their experiences of being involved with more than one language community. In contrast with the data from other studies with an interest in identity, the theme of language emerged spontaneously. We did not prioritise questions such as modes of language acquisition, learner identities, study abroad (Benson et al., 2013) or language learning ‘careers’ (Benson, 2011), although they are frequent topics in the narratives. We will argue that this data affords some new insights into the connection between individual ‘identity work’ (Miller & Schütze, 2011:13-14) and imagined Europe.

1. Language, identity, and European mental space

Within the European context, expansion of the imagined community beyond national boundaries almost always involves contact with and learning of other languages. Language is understood here as being situated in social interaction and inseparable from the social conditions, relations, practices and institutions routinely experienced by speakers. While the literature on language learning is clearly relevant to the theme of motivation and personal investment in languages, we also have a broader sociological interest in how narrators invoke language situations and experience in their biographical accounts of transnational mobility.

Theoretical and methodological efforts in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) originally concentrated on language teaching and learning, especially in the cases of children’s language acquisition and bilingualism. The most developed areas of SLA studies are associated with linguistics (White, 2003) and cognitive psychology (Doughty & Long, 2008). However, studies have increasingly recognised the relevance of identity formation to SLA (Benson et al., 2013; Nunan & Choi, 2010). In this context, Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004), Block (2007) and Norton (2013) have been influential in bringing together the theme of identity and the field of second language learning. Pedagogical literature shows how the multiple identities that students bring to their learning affect their acquisition of languages (Menard-Warwick, 2005). Research in the context of migration enlarged the debate on the processes of acculturation and assimilation (Perdue, 1993a, 1993b). Especially within the EU framework, SLA studies have focussed on the importance of educational mobility (Eichsteller, 2011; Young-Scholten, 2013), comparative studies measuring second language proficiency (Gerhards, 2014) and the link between linguistic proficiency and national sense of identification (Hochman & Davidov, 2014). The growth of educational mobility has prompted research on language in the context of studying abroad in Europe (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) and elsewhere (Benson et al., 2013), while studies on the educational and social impact of mobility often contain data on language learning and attitudes to language (King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Teichler & Janson, 2007). This diverse body of literature tends to assume a positive causal relationship between enlarging language skills and social mobility; hence language learning is often framed in terms of its contribution to cultural and symbolic capital (Norton, 2013). The metaphor of capital, as applied to one’s ability to use a second language, and the metaphor of investment in language acquisition, naturally steers the theoretical discussion towards the conceptual framework of Pierre Bourdieu (1992) and the value of Bourdieu’s contribution will be considered below. As well as invoking Bourdieusian ideas of capital, Norton (2013: 195) also makes the direct link between SLA and imagined communities of practice. Ryan (2006) and Seilhamer (2013) have advanced the idea of a global imagined community of English language users, including second language learners.

The interest in identity is often accompanied by an emphasis on narrative as the process which brings together the strands of multiple experiences and identities. Schifffrin (1996), for example, demonstrated the value of narrative analysis in the study of sociolinguistic constructions of identity. Pavlenko (2007) addresses the use of autobiographical narrative as a resource for the study of language in an article which applauds the growth of interest in personal narratives among applied linguists but is also critical of analytical approaches which fail to recognize the interpretive nature of the data and the distinctions between the subject content, the way the story is told, and the form of the text. The types of narrative discussed are diaries, linguistic biographies and language memoirs, which all have a topical focus on language. Alternatively, an autobiographical interview can be designed to show the unfolding of a whole life, allowing the topic of language learning to enter spontaneously into the narrative and reveal how the narrator's experiences of language are significant in making sense of their story. Franceschini's (2003) analysis of a single interview demonstrates the value of this approach. Benson et al. (2013: 25) acknowledge that too much emphasis on the contingency and multiplicity of self-narratives can be criticized “for underplaying the role of social and discursive forces in the construction of identities”. The Euroidentities project avoids this charge by deliberately searching for intimate connections between individual biographical identities and collective identities conceived of as imagined communities.

2. Methodology

The primary purpose of the Euroidentities project, an EU Framework 7 investigation (Miller, 2012)¹, was to explore the relationship between individual experiences and the spaces of ‘Europe’ in terms of economic life, social ties and culture, employing the extempore autobiographical narrative interview method developed by Schütze and colleagues (Riemann & Schütze, 1991; Riemann, 2003; Schütze, 2014). The interviews with residents of seven countries were intended to examine evidence for the development of European identity in the everyday social worlds of the participants, who were ordinary citizens of the EU, rather than members of any political or bureaucratic elite. The countries are not representative of the EU, but they include a broad range of experiences of recent European history from north, south, east and west, and different parameters of interacting with ‘Europe’. The selection of interviews was non-random, but designed to include sub-groups for comparison and contrast across the seven countries. To minimize the possibility that interviews would contain no narrative content relevant to personal engagement with the EU or Europe, the respondents were selected from groups assumed to be ‘sensitized’ to the topic of Europe by their previous experiences: the educationally mobile, transnational workers, farmers, cross-cultural intermediaries and workers in international civil society organizations (see Miller, 2012: 3-7). The assumption was that these individuals would display a greater sensitivity than others towards the issue of a European identity, by virtue of their personal experiences. They were expected to have cause to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of making their way within the spaces of Europe. Of course, personal opinions about the EU or European issues are likely to be held by any resident of a European country, but opinions were not our priority.

The interviews have the minimum of structure to give interviewees maximum freedom to express their life story from their own perspective, in their first language. Respondents are

¹ EU Framework 7 Collaborative Research Project in Socio-Economic Sciences and Humanities, Theme 8. The partners were from the UK (Northern Ireland and Wales), Germany, Italy, Bulgaria, Estonia and Poland. <http://www.euroidentities.org/>

given an explanation of the general purpose of the research and then invited to tell their own story, in their own way, without further intervention. The interviews begin with a stimulus formulation along the lines of “Please tell me your life story, how it has developed, how it started and how it has unfolded until today” (Miller, 2012: 25-26). The narrative which follows represents a flow of experience which reveals key biographical events, reactions to circumstances, and the meanings attached to situations. When this stage of the interview comes to an end (the coda), the interviewer moves to a more interrogative but still non-directive mode of questioning. Thus, the Euroidentities interviewers did not prompt respondents to speak on the subject of language (let alone experiences of second language acquisition), but the topic occurred spontaneously, especially in descriptions of educational experiences, and it figured regularly in narratives of life projects, both as a means and as a barrier to opportunities. The result is a distinctive form of qualitative data on language which complements data obtained by other researchers from surveys, focused interviews and administrative sources (e.g., European Commission, 2012; Extra & Yağmur, 2012).

We observed that the stories people tell about their lives often contain rich descriptions of experiences of language and language learning. Frequently we encountered narratives about language as a communicative space, references to language as a source of opportunities for, or difficulties in, biographical experience, as well as reflections on language aspirations and identity. There is sufficient detail to treat this as a distinct analytical theme which, from the point of view of our narrators, is an (on-) “going concern” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009: 127). In this article, we have selected for analysis interviews which contain significant or multiple references to language². The language references are not purely descriptive but contain explanations, justifications and argumentation. Biographically, they indicate structures of opportunity for mobility, careers and self-development, action schemes to realise ambitions, orientations to different cultures, sources of identity and difference, and obstacles to personal development. In our selection, we have sought to include a variety of countries, languages and social contexts, as well as a spread of age, gender and nationality. The key characteristics of the selected cases are summarized in the Appendix.

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Our analysis adopts elements of Schütze’s (2014) formal structural method, supplemented by a narrative ethnographic approach (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). The former emphasises the constraints of storytelling which shape the order of the narrative as well as the biographical ‘process structures’ which give form to the individual’s story (for example, through intentional schemes of action, alignment or non-alignment with institutional patterns, trajectories which lead to crisis and metamorphosis). The latter approach is concerned with the relationship between individual micro-narratives and macro narratives which reflect the history of nations and cultures. The steps in the analysis were, first, to make a summary of each life story in the sequence in which it occurs in the interview transcript, paying particular attention to references to language and language learning. We then used this sequential report to trace the salient process structures in the life story, including the long-term consequences of knowing languages. We compared interviews to draw out similarities and contrasts which help to reveal the ways in which individual stories resonate with bigger narratives of nation, culture and being in Europe. The main empirical conclusions from the wider study were that, in the groups

² This article is based on the analysis of 15 autobiographical narrative interviews selected from the Euroidentities corpus of 120. All names are pseudonyms. Quotations are reproduced directly from the interview transcripts, to reflect the style of the interviewees’ speech. Where the original language of the interview was not English, the transcript was made available for analysis in English translation. One of the interviews used here is presented in greater detail by M. Eichsteller in ‘Identity project under construction: European identity and educational mobility in the case of Majka’ (Miller, 2012: Chapter 4).

studied, biographical ways of relating to Europe are mostly implicit and situational, that images of Europe as some sort of collective identity are rare compared with orientations towards and within a “European mental space of reference” (Miller, 2012: 158). The space is ‘an imagined territory’ created through bottom-up processes which involve interaction between the multiple opportunities which exist for cross-border and cross-cultural communication, the forms of knowledge and learning which create a shared frame of reference, and practical commitments which encourage identification and belonging. Collective, especially national, identities in the sense of ‘imagined communities’ are relativized in and through this mental space (Schütze & Schröder-Wildhagen, 2012: 255-278).

Our research question concerning language learning and motivation is therefore about how people narrate their experiences of transnationality in a biographical perspective, and how acquiring a second language speaker identity in another community is linked to structural processes in the life course. These processes include the structural realities of EU politics and policies which feed into individual decisions to embark on new life projects or action schemes, such as learning and using a new language.

3. The narrative data

According to Schiffrin (1996: 170), “telling a story allows us to create a ‘story world’ in which we can represent ourselves against a backdrop of cultural expectations about a typical course of action; our identities as social beings emerge as we construct our own individual experiences as a way to position ourselves in relation to social and cultural expectations”. In the interviews the theme of language emerges through spontaneous recollections of particular experiences in the life course. The first (‘native’) language is a universal background feature in all the narratives, but rarely discussed. In contrast, stories about the learning of a second language or additional languages are very common. The process of learning a second language is narrated through the lens of social relationships, in terms of motivations, the learning process and the ability to use the second language in social contexts. The interviews capture the unique biographical moments where experiences of the second language broaden the social and cultural imagination and widen cognitive horizons. We will explore the evidence of these themes in biographical order from early childhood experiences of other languages, through experiences of education to mature relationships, before discussing whether the evidence can be interpreted as an orientation to European mental space. We will then address the question of how actors make use of second or additional languages within their action projects that transcend national borders.

Early experiences

Examples of narration of early experiences of second languages mark the contours of the imaginative horizons within which the narrator’s biography is taking place. In the case of **Brenda**, a UK teacher of modern languages, her first reference to another language is the recollection of her father’s attempt to communicate during holidays abroad when she was a child. Brenda says:

my father ... I don’t know if he was planning on a holiday abroad ... and he had a very old ... it was a kind of a 1950’s languages course and, you know ... he was trying to teach himself a little bit of French. And I can remember being absolutely fascinated by that, I thought that was an amazing thing for you to be able to do, to speak another language.

Brenda highlights the monolingual context she grew up in but her father's attempt to communicate in French increases her awareness of the world outside her everyday environment. This awareness directs her future interests in the French language. Similarly, **Joanna**, a UK journalist working in Germany mentions an early connection to German culture:

Like my dad invited always a lot of Germans to stay with us from university. Because he speaks German and likes Germans and so I was among Germans as a child... So I decided 'Oh, if I have to spend a year abroad, I'll spend it with the Germans rather than the French'.

The importance of second language recognition not only opens out the individual horizons of Brenda and Joanna, but also provides them with an insight into the mechanisms of second language communication. In her narrative, **Brenda** emphasises this by saying:

I can still remember the very first conversation that I ever had with an alternative language speaker, of my own volition, where I said something to them, and they said something back and I understood it; it just made me feel amazing.

In Brenda and Joanna's narratives, there is also a strong association between the idea of travelling and the idea of communication. For them, speaking a second language is a tool to engage and explore the other as well as to locate oneself clearly in a specific linguistic and cultural context. This creates a particular individual standpoint: both are explorers of the world outside their first language environment in a rather intellectual pursuit of, and delight in, 'cultural diversity'.

The narratives of individuals brought up in multilingual environments highlight different aspects of early experiences. At the beginning of her narrative, **Daniela** says:

I was born in Romania, next to the Hungarian border and that's why I had my three mother-tongue languages. That means - Hungarian, Romanian and German. And at the age of 14 - I came over to Germany. Well, I got basically two possibilities. The first one, I got one year scholarship with school just to stay for a year and the other one was ... kind of sports related. And so I decided to take the second one ... although we were almost European Union, I needed about half a year to get out of Romania and then I started in ... the north of Germany to play basketball.

Historical background and family relationships created the multilingual community in which Daniela grew up. She mentions speaking German within her family, Hungarian with friends and Romanian at school. She is very proud of her heritage, but she does not celebrate that diversity as something special.

Education and travel abroad

For many of our interviewees the first significant encounter with a second language is through formal education and they describe these early experiences as having a lasting impact into higher education and later careers. **Emma**, from Northern Ireland, notes how her (primary school) headmaster "*would always teach us a little bit of French, we learned a little bit of Irish - he was quite interested in ensuring that our world view was a little bit more expanded.*" **Brenda** says "*the very first French lesson I ever had I absolutely fell in love with it, I thought it was fantastic*". Likewise, for **Joanna** "*French was always my best subject and I had no problem with French ... so that was really good*". Doing well at languages as a school subject can shape the future trajectory; like Joanna, Brenda went on to study languages at university.

While there is a degree of contingency in this, a seemingly accidental affinity with languages, encouragement or pressure from others, especially parents and influential teachers, helps motivate and steer individual choices. **Majka**, a Polish PhD student in the UK, tells how she had been learning English “*for many, many years. My parents have always, from the beginning, said: English is a basic thing, you have to know languages.*” **Reni**, an international academic, recalls that her parents played an even more decisive role: “*during the summer ... all the children played in the afternoon, while we translated whole books from Hungarian into Bulgarian ... in order to train ourselves in the language*”. Reni considers having learned the language “*a great wealth*”, and later applied the technique of studying literary classics to learn English.

Gaining access to another language opens up possibilities which can be transformational for a person’s sense of identity and social recognition. If simply acquiring the language does not always have this effect, using it in the context of travel abroad generally will. **Emma** reports that she was

very, very lucky because I was ... granted a scholarship to study Flemish ... so I went out to Belgium and I had the most amazing year of my life ... because it really did open my eyes. ... we had students from all the universe.

Majka shares this experience of entering an international zone during her Erasmus year abroad in Holland:

it was something that changed me completely. It truly changed my approach to life. Really ... I was living with a Spanish girl in one room and the kitchen I was sharing with a Canadian and an American girl... I mostly spent my time with those girls, so I was speaking English all the time. And to be honest, that was the first time that I started to learn how to speak English.

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The decision to study abroad involves conscious control and planning. For **Maria**, an Italian studying in the UK, what begins as an unplanned journey when “*I decided to go to the linguistic high school following in my sister’s footsteps*” becomes more purposeful when she acts to remove herself from her fellow Erasmus students. The realisation after two months

... that we spoke everything except English forced me to leave my Italian friends ... to find more international friends but I looked for specifically English ones because speaking English with a French guy was no use and from that moment I lived a life not like an Erasmus student but like a typical English girl i.e. we did English dinners, English barbecues. I was very at home – really at home with the language.

Maria develops the sense that she can cope in a different, foreign, environment and says her language studies have contributed to the “*internationalisation of my personality*”. Likewise **Brigitta**, an Estonian student abroad in Germany, refers to that

understanding ... that everything works in the same way at any place in the world, that it is not ... anything extraordinary or unreachable... neither in a physical sense nor - so to speak - in a sense taking a challenge and coping with it.

For neither Brigitta nor Maria does this necessarily mean that they can or will make use of this realisation in later life. When she returns to Italy, Maria finds her path blocked because her professor refuses to recognise the qualifications she has gained in England, and she settles back into her previous rather circumscribed Italian existence. Despite travel and study in several European countries, Brigitta says she has “*never felt any respect or a kind of admiration to life*

abroad, nor did I have any urgent desire to go over there or stay or settle down there.” However others seek to build on and enlarge the openings provided by command of another language. A religious calling took **Lisa** from Northern Ireland to a short residential course in France, where she discovered that

actually I could speak some French, much to my surprise and really enjoyed the sense of achievement ... and eating different food and it was really the first time I suppose that I'd really been out of Ireland you know, properly.

Taking a year out of her university course she joined intensive French classes with a multi-national group. Lisa keeps in touch with some of those she met at this time. In the above cases, we see the enduring impact of education, not in the narrow sense of a mechanism of language learning but as a context within which the narrators form and re-form their sense of self.

Personal and intimate relationships

All life stories have personal relationships at their heart. People's perceptions of opportunities, possibilities for self-development, barriers and limitations are shaped by and shape their personal ties, especially to family and home. This is apparent in the case of couples who have different first languages, parents who have to make language choices on behalf of their children, and friends of different nationalities who seek a common language for their interaction. Languages have both practical and symbolic importance in their biographies. In the context of such personal relationships, language is the essential medium for relationships to succeed and is likely to be linked to an enlarged sense of identity.

In the case of a Welsh-Swedish couple, **Gwilym** describes their decision to move to Sweden after some years of married life in Wales, in order to maintain contact with the Swedish side of the family, the language and culture, and give his wife a chance *“to recapture her old background... She felt at that time she was losing her language”*. The outcome is to make the language choices in the family more complex and in practice trilingual, based on the first languages of the adults and the desired outcome for the children: *“So then I was talking Welsh to my children and English to my wife, but she was talking English to her husband, Welsh to her daughters and Swedish to her son”*. The interview indicates the importance of relatively egalitarian family relationships and the receptivity of both the Welsh and Swedish destination countries to their chosen way of life. A more negative story is provided by **Kinga**, who described her experience of a Polish-Japanese relationship. She explains that the relation between the couple looked completely different in ‘Asia’ compared with Poland because *“it could be said that a woman does not count much in Japan ... There is not much [a woman] can say and nobody really asks her about what she thinks”*. But she also describes her Japanese as *“not good enough”*. She says *“There was a plan that I would learn the language there, but somehow at the time we stopped being together my Japanese wasn't very advanced”*.

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Brigitta says she did not go out of her way to form friendships while in Germany, but recalls one acquaintance, a German of Turkish origin, who surprised and impressed her because of how many foreign languages he knew, *“so cosmopolitan”*. However, it should not be assumed that mobility invariably leads to language diversity. **Alexandra** decided to experience at first hand the new opportunities available on Poland's accession to the EU. She left for the UK to visit a friend she had met in a chat-room, but when he failed to support her she faced a situation of extreme discomfort, exacerbated by her lack of English. Her recovery began when she met an English man who she would later marry and settle down with in the UK, in a process of

complete cultural immersion. Acquiring English was part of the process of assimilation accompanied by a deliberate refusal to acknowledge her Polish roots.

What we see from these examples is that acquiring a second or further language has the power to enlarge awareness, transforming personality in a way that respondents regard as ‘amazing’ or life changing. It enables them to cross linguistic divides, opening up an appreciation of aspects of foreign cultures (food, manners, family habits), throwing a light on the peculiarities of their own background and environment, enabling the development of personal friendships, and even facilitating entry into multilingual intimate and family relationships. Through these contacts, people make lasting social connections across national boundaries, and take a step towards becoming transnational. The interviewees tend to frame this in terms of relationships to specific groups of people, or with particular individuals, or moments of exceptional communion with others, rather than to generalize about absorption into other cultures, let alone make any explicit reference to such a grandiose notion as European solidarity or identity. Where there are references to a sense of being European, it arises in those instances of relationships which reach beyond Europe, such as Kinga’s experiences of life in Japan, which throw into relief some major dissonances with previous habits and experience. These developments in personal biography produce a widening of imaginative horizons which allows the individual to engage with the social and cultural characteristics of the ‘other’, but falls short of the breadth of solidarity and commitment to others presumed by Anderson’s conception of the imagined community. For this reason, we prefer to conceptualize these outcomes in terms of the enlargement of the ‘mental space’ inhabited by our respondents. If not ‘European’, this mental space is at least transnational, enabling individuals to transcend their own familiar regional and national horizons and move towards an exploration of other possibilities of life. They learn to value aspects of the modes of behaviour of other regional and national collectivities, but without necessarily grasping them as a coherent community to which they owe some debt of mutual loyalty (Miller, 2012: 258).

Language in careers

In narratives of their later life, interviewees reveal how their command of a second language has assisted, and sometimes hindered, them in achieving their objectives. While it might be thought that any ability with additional languages confers some positive benefit, accounts of using them prove often to be fraught with negative experiences of obstacles, failure, shame, and powerlessness. It is here that Bourdieu’s theories of linguistic capital seem most pertinent. In situations where speaking a second language opens the way for the realisation of personal and professional action schemes, second language proficiency can be presented as primarily a means to an end. **Daniela** realised that her multilingual abilities were an asset very early on in her life. It was the fact that she spoke fluent German that opened doors for her to partake in an international sports exchange. Thereafter her awareness of international opportunities and ability to exploit them become a key facet of her biographical experiences. She is conscious that these structures of opportunities form part of a bigger institutional market, in which she needs to use her skills to facilitate her individual aspirations and plans. **Jakub** from Poland shows a similar awareness of the advantages conferred by linguistic abilities, and he offers a highly instrumental account of his trajectory. Learning French is a key to opening up professional opportunities. His narrative is almost entirely career oriented, a story of ‘cunning’ and adaptability through which he flourishes in the world of IT consultancy.

Jakub left Poland to participate in the EU Erasmus programme, arriving with only very basic French. He learned the language alongside his studies and his work as a hotel night shift receptionist. Jakub mentions that the *“French language is a difficult language. And you know,*

if you want to work as a professional, you need to speak the language". He explains it is not enough to just pick up the language as you might as a babysitter or even as a construction worker. He recalls:

particularly the first year, that was incredible hard-core. Not knowing the language, it was tough... And in general about the beginnings, working the night shifts and all that. Well, but it paid off. But all the time you're saying. ... we had to invest.

The reference to investment is telling; for Jakub, the language is a form of capital providing access to future career opportunities. Once he had overcome the language barrier, he was able to manage his entry into the French labour market and cope with the demands of working in a high-powered international office. He even seems blasé about it when saying:

in general, right now no matter where you go in Europe, if they send you ... communicate in French, in English without any problems. Right now more and more people do speak English ... Europe is small and no matter where they send you, you'll cope.

Jakub is one of the few interviewees who refers explicitly to Europe in this way. Jakub's preoccupation throughout is to make sure his investment of time and effort pays off:

If I wouldn't have seen what's next, some opportunity, I would have gone back straight to Poland. Because if you just stay aimlessly in a foreign country, well, it makes no sense to be sitting there. What for? It gives you nothing.

Jakub's perspective is quite unlike those who express a love or admiration for different places and cultures.

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Even though Jakub focuses in his narration on learning a second language, the main form of capital he deploys is his expertise with IT and computers, and there is evidence that he is also a great social networker. Language is a precondition, a necessary asset for his progress in France, but not his main professional skill set. A similar pattern in professional narrative can be found in the life story of **Gwilym**, in which the demand for medical doctors in Sweden grants him entry into the labour market whilst his Swedish language skills need time to catch up. In both Jakub and Gwilym's narratives, learning the new language is contingent on the struggle of working in a different cultural environment. Similar patterns can be observed in the stories of other transnational couple relationships, where second language learning is a vital but subsidiary aspect of the continuing development of relationships with one's extended family and children.

In some circumstances, the second language can also become a personal and professional obstacle in the employment or relationship action scheme. In the case of **Joanna**, working in Germany, language is a constant source of frustration. Having studied at an elite British university, she describes her experiences with language in terms of competition with other learners. She says:

I got to university and I was the worst, it was awful. Everybody else was really good, a lot of people, they had German parents or they had lived in Germany for a year. A lot of people had taken a year out between school and university and gone to Germany for a year, so they could speak it very well, and I hadn't done that, and people were just very clever, and I suddenly felt really average to poor, which had never been something I had experienced.

Joanna, a high achiever, persisted in her pursuit of mastering German. She now speaks the language, but still falls short of her dream of “*a state of fluent, mistake-free German*”. Her efforts to write in German about business matters and German life were heavily edited and corrected by colleagues, so eventually she “*decided I don’t want to write in German anymore, that’s too depressing*”. Her struggle with language seems to have tainted her overall experiences in Germany. She often mentions that she hated her stay in Hamburg and Berlin and concludes her narrative by indicating her intention to give up on her plan to use German as a professional working language, opting instead for ‘international journalism’, where she can use her English and some of her German to increase her chances in the professional market.

Eric, a manager from the UK with career experience in Spain and the Netherlands, also highlights the importance of foreign languages in the international labour market. He is proactive and achieves some success in learning French and Spanish. At one stage he invests his redundancy money to realize his project of an international career. Yet he experiences language behaviour which frustrates his progress. This occurs when he is working with Dutch colleagues who he says “*could be very rude*”. They would revert to Dutch if they wanted to exclude Eric from a conversation, and when they realized he was gaining fluency in Dutch, they spoke in German. To succeed in business, Eric had to be tenacious, to get involved and negotiate around “*the whole cultural thing*”. Command of a dominant international language, English, does not help Eric realise his ambitions. A similar blockage is experienced by **Pauline**, an Irish born professional who, after some international experiences, attempted to settle in Denmark with her Danish husband. While people in her environment spoke English well, during lunch times she felt excluded from their conversations. Pauline says:

I think it’s because I want to learn Danish ... But it’s really hard. Because every day, I push myself to try to fit in – or try to integrate. You know, my Danish isn’t that great yet so I can’t, I can understand more, but sometimes I can’t even find the words that I need to be able to say something ... there was one day last week where I went out and there were a few people sitting around, people that I actually really like and that I would talk to normally. But they were sort of having conversations anyway and I was sitting there. I’d finished my lunch and ... I was ready actually just to go back to my office and, and cry almost, because I just felt like, gosh, I so don’t fit in.

In the case of Pauline the language experience has a prominent impact on all aspects of her life. She struggles to keep her professional identity, social connections and social status, and in due course decides to return to Northern Ireland.

4. Commentary

We set out to discover how stories about language are embedded in extempore autobiographies and how they are linked to structural processes in the life course. Languages are clearly assets with social value for their users, but they are also sites where biographical work needs to be done, such as coming to terms with otherness and experiences of diversity.

It is in their work oriented accounts of later life that our respondents come closest to expressing the approach to language as capital promulgated by Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1992: 76-78) describes how in situations of linguistic diversity, bilingual or dialect speakers anticipate ‘profits’ by following the ‘law of price formation’ in that particular market, as evidenced by code-switching, self-censorship, accents and other forms which reveal what is possible or impossible to say in any particular context. In a related discussion, Bourdieu (1986: 411-413) refers to the ‘right to speak’. In an analysis of the political field and political opinion, he notes

the capacity of some, but not others, to produce discourse about the social world. He contrasts the “authorized speech of status-generated competence, a powerful speech which helps to create what it says” with “the silence of an equally status-linked incompetence, which is experienced as technical incapacity...” (Bourdieu, 1986: 413).

In a similar vein, Norton and McKinney (2011) argue that learning a second language should be considered in terms of investment, an individual’s attempt to gain access to symbolic resources and increase their cultural capital. However, the outcome of investment must be negotiated, via various social groups and networks, as learners “struggle to appropriate the voices of others ... and negotiate language as a system and as a social practice” (Norton & McKinney, 2011: 81). In other words, they must establish ‘the right to speak’. This approach highlights the social aspects of second language learning by pointing to the interaction between the learner’s agency and the social structures they encounter, which can either nurture or hinder progress. It is highly pertinent to the interpretation of our interviews, although our cases are even more diverse than the migrant learners in Norton and McKinney’s research. The narratives in our sample contain clear examples of this interaction, including the cases of Eric and Pauline above. The linguistic ‘market’ is not homogeneous, and the value of capital varies according to how it is embodied in specific relations between speakers. For instance, in the cases of Eric and Pauline we see how command of a dominant international language, such as English, the ‘lingua franca’ of much of contemporary Europe, seems to offer capital advantages in a linguistic market, but in reality, its value is very context-specific. Mastery of the host language proves to be essential for gaining access not only to professional opportunities, but also to normal everyday social participation. Even Joanna’s advanced ability to use the language in everyday social and work situations is challenged when faced with the standards of professional writers of German.

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The capital and market metaphor and the rights theme together provide a potential framework through which to interpret the biographical narrative data on language. They highlight the relationship between dispositions (the probabilities associated with a given position in the social structure) and the capacity to use linguistic capital (to profit from understanding and the ability to produce discourse). The mounting evidence of the importance of the social contexts of learning suggests that simple accumulation is not the norm, as Bourdieu implies – a point which he does not go on to elaborate except in terms of the ‘interests’ of actors. Thompson (1992: 16) notes how, in his attempts to define capital, Bourdieu assumes the fundamental link between actions and interests, between the practices of agents and the interests which they knowingly or unknowingly pursue (Bourdieu, 1992: 16). At the same time, Bourdieu rejects the idea that interests are always narrowly economic, and therefore capital must not be construed as an exclusively economic asset. Nor is it simply a reward for motivation. Gaining competence in a second or additional language can gain admittance to and acceptance within social relations which are far removed from calculation of financial or material gain, for example by providing an entrée into new worlds of meaning and new kinds of social practice. Among our examples there are some, such as Brenda, who choose not to ‘cash in’ their linguistic capital in pursuit of economic profit, and others like Maria who find their way to material advantage blocked, but who nevertheless value the benefits they have accrued in capacity to appreciate different conventions and ways of living. Their mental space has been enlarged, enabling them to engage in new types of acts of exploration, comparison and imagination across national frontiers (Schütze & Schröder-Wildhagen, 2012: 261). However, as Schütze and Schröder-Wildhagen (2012: 262) note, this is a risky undertaking since entering the agency space of a different nation can entail “a systematic devaluation of [their] social,

educational, cultural, symbolic capital ... the degradation experienced due to a lack of competence”.

Whilst issues of language variation, dialect and code-switching are prominent in single language contexts, they become overwhelmingly complex in multilingual situations of language learning combined with experiences of transnational mobility. Thus a linguistic ethnography conducted in a multicultural urban milieu in the UK concludes: “Here, language was up for grabs, traded, exchanged, bartered, wrangled over and negotiated, as language ideology and practice moved across time and space” (Grenfell, 2011: 146). In such situations the ‘right to speak’ is not only indicative of power hierarchies within the society but also of the hidden structure of interests in the game between the ‘native’ and the ‘other’.

There is an aspect of Bourdieu’s (1992) theory of language and symbolic power which goes beyond likening language to capital and characterizing the market as a structure of power relations, where linguistic expression always depends on the laws of the markets in which it is found. It is the aspect of language which Bourdieu describes in terms of the logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1990). Language communicates and represents, but also occludes the social relationships that constitute it as a form of power. It is in this spirit that we have responded to Grenfell’s (2011: 222) call to “look more into the biographical elements, habitus, of language users, the way they interact with local site features, fields, how that local site is configured, and the way it links with broader social structures”.

Conclusion

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In taking up the challenge to “articulate the imagined” (Ryan, 2006: 42), we have shown how individuals’ relationships, identities and investments in languages, at least in the European context and among individuals who are particularly sensitized to transnational issues, can be construed as an enlarged space in which participation has important consequences for identification and belonging. Mobility plays an important part in this, as it does in Benedict Anderson’s account of the emergence of the imagined community of the nation (Anderson, 1991). For Anderson, it is the recurrent journeys or ‘pilgrimages’ undertaken by functionaries and others around a shared territory, and within a framework of common institutions associated with a shared language, that sows the seeds of the imagined community. In his words, “the interlock between particular educational and administrative pilgrimages provided the territorial base for new ‘imagined communities’ in which ‘natives’ could come to see themselves as ‘nationals’” (Anderson, 1991: 140). The limitation of ‘Europe’ as an imagined community, as expressed in our interview material, is that while it provides a sort of outer shell for peoples’ imaginations, and definitely has some of the necessary aspects of legal, administrative, and political unity, most journeys are not ‘around’ Europe, but along particular paths – cross-national rather than supra-national. Consequently, our respondents do not talk explicitly about a European identity, or make generalizations about a European ‘we’. For this reason, the ‘European mental space of reference’ they inhabit falls well short of an imagined community, and does not yet engender the kind of “mutual sense of loyalty of its individual and collective members towards each other” (Schütze & Wildhagen, 2012: 258) which we associate with the nation.

What our investigation of language in the biographies of persons implicated in the evolving European project has shown is that language can be considered as capital in the sense that it has value; it can be accumulated, invested and spent. The interviews illustrate the accumulation

process through family, schooling, adult learning and careers. Multilingual backgrounds and successful second language acquisition are clearly advantageous for expanding cultural horizons, increasing mobility, extending networks and enhancing careers. Some narratives describe the struggles and limits of language learning, while others depict it as a natural process – but none dismiss it as having no value. Language is a resource and the more of it a person has, the better their position in the ‘markets’ for language – except that the economic market metaphor quickly breaks down because languages are not like currencies which can be exchanged at rates which reflect their comparative values according to supply and demand. Linguistic markets are differentiated by size, territory, status and power, as the terms ‘major’ languages or ‘minority’ languages suggest. Languages have equivalence linguistically, but they are not socially equal (Bourdieu, 1977: 652). The size limitation of the present study means that it cannot represent the full scale and diversity of languages in Europe and there is a preponderance of experiences of mobility from east to west, which reflects recent trends in migration. Further research would ideally have data from a wider spread of populations and experiences to draw on, but the biographical approach we have used does not have to start from a comprehensive map of institutions (especially language education and formal practices of teaching and learning), groups of speakers, policies to promote language acquisition, or connections between dominant languages and mobility. We have shown the value of a method which investigates language without constructing the object of research as language itself.

Because, in our narrative interviews, people are not answering an explicit question about the language, but rather their observations are required to make sense of their story within the constraints of narrative, the biographical narrative method utilised here shows the workings of the linguistic field behind the features of language and linguistic behaviour. It reveals how language is a structure of power relations experienced by the individual as significant for their biography, sometimes as opportunity, sometimes as constraint. Extempore narrative is particularly valuable data for accessing this ‘occluding’ character of language because it reveals, but does not rely on, reflexive awareness of the processes which constitute the individual’s experience. When people talk spontaneously of their experiences of language in their own biography they recall things that are omitted by other methods. Our aim here has been to contribute to the understanding of language and social life by demonstrating the potential of biographical narrative analysis, and to throw light on the processes through which people undertaking transnational journeys (real or symbolic) expand their imagined horizons and perhaps take tentative steps towards a larger imagined community. We have sought to ground this empirically in the experiences of a mobile population in Europe, finding their way through the growing diversity of languages and cultures. In the fine details of narration, we observe what might be called the banal ‘familiar habits’ of language (Billig, 1995: 94) in relation to the European social context. Whereas Billig was explaining the contribution of everyday language to national ideologies, we have seen that everyday explanations of individual social conduct often require the narrator to refer to language in a way that we can interpret as an analogous process of banalization in European space.

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Appendix: list of cases

- Brenda, age 48, British, studied languages at school and now a language teacher in German and French.
- Emma – in her 30s, from Northern Ireland, learned languages at school, she was an Erasmus student in Belgium where she learned Flemish.
- Joanna, age 24, British, learned languages at school and university, she is attempting a career in journalism in Germany.
- Daniela, age 28, Romanian, has lived in Germany since the age of 11, professional sportswoman.
- Reni, age 40, Bulgarian, learned languages in school – French and English, studied in the UK and Hungary, currently lives in Bulgaria.
- Majka, age 26, Polish, learned English at school, PhD student in the UK.
- Maria, age 28, Italian, studied in the UK (Erasmus) learned languages at school.
- Lisa, age 28, from Northern Ireland, studied languages at school, Erasmus student in France.
- Brigitta, age 31, Estonian, learned language at school and studied in Germany.
- Gwilym, age 55, British, married to a Swedish citizen, lived and practiced medicine in Sweden for 10 years.
- Kinga, age 31, Polish, currently studies in the UK, English teacher in China, married to a Japanese citizen.

- Pauline, age 31, Northern Irish, currently completing PhD in Denmark, married to a Danish citizen.
- Alexandra, age 30, Polish, learned language in the UK, pharmacist, married to a UK citizen.
- Jakub, age 30, Polish, learned French language during Erasmus educational exchange, working as an IT consultant in France
- Eric, age 51, British, studied language at university, working in Spain and Holland.